

## Snowfall by Miss\_Peletier

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**Summary:**

“What the hell?” Joyce whispered, equally confused, stunned, and joyous.

Daylight had begun seeping in around the edges of the sky, painting the darkness purple and red, and through those colors Joyce saw her driveway had been shoveled in its entirety. A path had been meticulously cleared for the cars to back out, piles of snow evenly spaced where gravel met grass. Windshields had been scraped clean of whatever ice and snow had covered them in the night. It was as though she'd somehow sleepwalked her way through that dreadful winter morning routine, though she knew that hadn't been the case.

But who else would've done it?

## Snowfall

It was the first snowfall of 1985, and Joyce Byers awoke with an ache in her bones.

The wind howled, a monster pounding its fists against her bedroom window. She shivered, fighting the instinct to yank the thin quilt and knit blanket up to her chin and defy the beast that was winter in Hawkins. But she knew better.

There was snow.

It wasn't *that* much snow.

The kids would have school today, despite their wishes otherwise. She would have to trudge into Melvald's with slush clinging to her boots, seeping through where her soles parted from the fraying synthetic material, chilling her toes and numbing her feet until well into the afternoon.

A little snow wouldn't stop the hustle and bustle of a Monday in Hawkins – life would go on, as it always did. As she slid out of bed and pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a bulky, knit sweater, she couldn't help noticing the deafening quiet. Jonathan wouldn't have to be up for another hour or so, and Will had another hour and a half of sleep. But the duty fell to her to shovel, to toss the unwanted inches of white gunk off their cracked driveway and scrape ice off the cars so that everyone could get about their lives.

Closing the door to her bedroom behind her, softly, as not to wake the boys, Joyce tried not to think about the frigid morning air or the needlepoint pinpricks of itchiness that surfaced each time the sweater brushed against her bare skin. Given their situation just a few months ago, some snow was nothing to gripe about: they'd faced much, much bigger foes. *She'd* faced much, much bigger foes. The memory was an echo, bouncing back all sorts of fears and recent nightmares, louder and louder. Her breath caught.

On instinct, she took a few steps down the hallway and gently pushed open the door to Will's room. The hallway was lit only by white

moonlight – not enough to wake him, but enough for her to see him by – and she breathed a tiny sigh of relief when she glimpsed his sleeping form buried under the comforter she'd promised him she didn't need. She smiled, standing for a few seconds, watching his chest rise and fall, the dim moonlight turning his hair to a kind of soil-brown color: her hair color. He was okay. They were all okay.

She couldn't help a cursory glance around the room, just to make sure nothing sinister lurked in the long shadows that wrapped long, dark tendrils around his desk and the sketches taped on his walls. There was nothing amiss, but even so, she swallowed hard. There was one drawing she could barely look at, though time was, thankfully, making it a little easier.

*Bob Newby, superhero.*

Deciding she'd lingered long enough and feeling that familiar dreadful lump forming in her throat, Joyce stepped away from her son's room. He was fine, and that was all that mattered. The rest...the rest she had to deal with, by herself. And she could. She had been. She would.

Joyce took a few more steps down the hallway, stopping outside Jonathan's room, taking a few deep breaths until grief relinquished its hold on her throat. She peered through the doorway, desperate for the sight of her eldest, knowing his sleeping form would be enough to put a smile on her face. Her caring, helpful, wonderful boy. For everything Will had been through, Jonathan had suffered, too: his pain simmered beneath the surface, hidden in blank stares and hugs that held on tighter than they used to, embraces that masked a fear of being forced to let go. Joyce had no idea how she'd be able to drop him off at school next year.

*You don't have to think about that right now*, she reminded herself when she felt her heartbeat speeding up, like it always did when she started thinking about Jonathan and college and losing him to the great big world. *Right now, you have to go shovel the goddamn driveway.*

But she needed to see her son first. So she opened the door a crack, just as she'd done with Will, and...

He wasn't there.

Joyce frowned, certain her sleep and cold-addled brain must have been yanking hallucinations from her nightmares. She opened the door wider, letting the hallway light in, and stepped into the room.

He definitely wasn't there.

His covers had been thrown back, his pajamas scattered in heaps on the floor. A glance around the room confirmed her fears, and she didn't bother forcing herself to breathe evenly.

"Jonathan?" she said, though she knew better than to expect an answer.

She turned around and practically sprinted down the hallway, turning toward the kitchen, Jim's number already on her fingertips. *Jonathan's gone. Jonathan's gone and I can't find him and I don't know where he i-*

"Mom?" a familiar voice said, and she froze in her tracks.

"Jonathan?" she breathed.

There was a long pause, in which both parties seemed to question why they were hearing the other's voice at such an ungodly hour of the morning. Joyce took a few moments to compose herself, turning toward her son, who had – for some reason – taken a portable desk light and his textbooks out to the kitchen table. *He's okay*, she reassured herself. *He's right here. He's fine. He's fine.*

"Why are you up so early, honey?" she asked. He had to have gotten up well before her – he was wearing his school clothes, and he even had his shoes on.

"I have a big biology test today," he said, his sentence marred halfway through by a loud, long yawn. "But I thought it was going to be a snow day, and..."

He trailed off, and Joyce couldn't help but smile. Part of her knew she should be a little annoyed with him – he shouldn't have put all his eggs into the snow day basket, after all – but she'd done the same

thing as a kid. And Jim had, several times, failed tests as a result of his ill-fated optimism that school would be closed.

“Good luck, sir,” Joyce smiled, squeezing his shoulder as she walked past, steeling herself for the onslaught of negative temperatures and ice. His shirt felt a little wet, and she noticed his hair was dripping: he must have just gotten out of the shower. He had a little over an hour to study...God, how she hoped he wasn’t just starting now.

“Where are you going?” Jonathan asked, and she could hear a confused scowl in his voice.

“To shovel the driveway,” she said, pulling on her boots. She added, because Jim was a terrible influence on her and she just couldn’t resist: “So you can take that test.”

“Do you need help?” he asked, like she knew he would.

“No,” she said. “You’re soaking wet. If you go out there, you’ll catch a cold.”

“Mom, I can do it.”

“It’s all right. I can take care of it.”

*“Mom.”*

“Study for your test.”

Jonathan didn’t answer, and she guessed he’d gone back to his textbook. Joyce made her way toward the front door and sat down on the floor to get ready for the cold, fingers fumbling with the nearly decade-old, fraying laces on her boots, and she only managed to tie them into a knot. It would do. Her coat was easier to command, and she shoved a hat on and pulled on a pair of black mittens.

Seeing no point in delaying it any further, she pushed open the front door, ready for whatever frozen hell into which winter would drag her. She stepped out into the cold morning, shoving the door shut behind her, feeling the icy wind strip her warm breath from her lips in wisps of gray. Her feet touched the porch, and –

Her feet touched the *porch*. Not snow, which should have blown up from the driveway and coated the wood with a dusting of white. Her feet touched wood, solidness, a hard surface. The *porch*.

When she looked out, following the path from her home into the road, her jaw dropped. The porch wasn't the only oddity.

"What the hell?" she whispered, equally confused, stunned, and joyous.

Daylight had begun seeping in around the edges of the sky, painting the darkness purple and red, and through those colors Joyce saw her driveway had been shoveled in its entirety. A path had been meticulously cleared for the cars to back out, piles of snow evenly spaced where gravel met grass. Windshields had been scraped clean of whatever ice and snow had covered them in the night. It was as though she'd somehow sleepwalked her way through that dreadful winter morning routine, though she knew that hadn't been the case. But who else...

*Oh.*

She smiled and turned around, stepping back into her house. She sighed as its warmth embraced her, and pulled off her boots in one fluid motion. She didn't bother with her hat, mittens, or coat: not at a time like this.

"Thank you!" she exclaimed, practically floating as she walked back to the kitchen and pulled him into a tight hug. Jonathan's head snapped up as he shifted from focusing on the pages of his textbook to focusing on her, and he frowned.

"I'm sorry?"

"The driveway," she said, stepping away and smiling. "You didn't have to do that."

It would be just like him, she thought, to be modest about it. Did he even have a test he was studying for, or had this been a ploy? At any rate, she could hardly believe his kindness. Well, she could believe it – he cooked breakfast for them every morning, and even dinner,

sometimes, when she got trapped at Melvald's – but sacrificing his sleep to do the winter task she absolutely despised was so kindhearted she thought he might've melted the snow outside.

"Mom, I -"

"Jonathan," she interrupted, still beaming. "I really appreciate it, honey. I'll take care of breakfast this morning and take Will to school. You just focus on your test, okay?"

She thought he'd be elated – instead, his brow furrowed.

"Mom, I di-" he paused halfway through his sentence, realization seeming to wash over him as his expression changed. As if he'd suddenly remembered something.

"What?" Joyce asked, confused.

"I, uh," Jonathan stammered, "thanks. I really need to focus on this."

Joyce smiled again, though the expression was now tainted with a bit of uncertainty. Something was off about his behavior, but she couldn't quite pinpoint what it was. Was he just tired? Was he nervous about the test? Was he coming down with something, because he'd gotten up in the middle of the night to lift this burden off her shoulders? Whatever it was, she'd do anything she could do help.

"Of course," she said.

And because she was happy and felt lighter than she had in a very long time, she leaned down and pressed a quick kiss to his forehead. Jonathan squirmed – he'd long ago outgrown such motherly displays of affection – but even despite his odd behavior, she was overflowing with gratitude and had to let it show before her heart burst.

"Thank you," she repeated, and she couldn't help noticing the beat of hesitation that passed before Jonathan responded.

"You're welcome," he said. "I'm happy I could help."

\*\*\*

It was the fifth big snowfall of 1985, and Jim Hopper awoke with an ache in his bones.

“Dammit,” he breathed into the early morning air, shutting his alarm clock off with a slam of his hand against the freezing metal. He didn’t look at the time, because he damn well knew what time it was, and he damn well knew he was an idiot. And he didn’t know how much longer he could keep this up, but he’d be damned if he didn’t keep trying.

At least, he thought as he pulled on his uniform, it was Friday. He and Jane were going to rent a movie from the video store tonight and eat a ton of discounted Valentine’s Day candy, maybe play a few rounds of Scrabble if they hadn’t both passed out on the couch by the time the credits rolled. It was going to be a good night, and he needed a good night, because the rest of the week had been shit.

God, he was so *tired*.

It took him only a few minutes to gather up his things – or at least, the things he would need for his self-imposed snowfall ritual – and he stumbled out the door, trying to remember why the hell he’d taken it upon himself to do this. He didn’t have to keep going, after the first time. There was nothing that necessitated this, nothing in it for him, or Jane. But there existed a kind of magnetic pull now, something that drew him back every time the snowfall was unmanageable, and he couldn’t help it.

Jane’s door was closed, and he didn’t want to startle her with the squeaky door hinges that would undoubtedly screech if he tried to check on her. Everything was fine between them now – she had never tried to leave since October, and now that she had a set date, a time when she could be back into the world, they argued a whole lot less. Thank God. He didn’t know how many arguments with a telekinetic teenager he could take. He didn’t know how many arguments with a telekinetic teenager he could *survive*, either, remembering the shattering glass that had accompanied their last big blowout.

But seeing Jane when she was happy, when she spent time with her friends and how she grinned when she bit into one of those Eggo waffles and how she cheered when she won a game of Boggle...it was



worth whatever risk might come with her powers. Losing Sara had blasted a hole through him he wasn't sure he could repair. It wasn't pain, not really, it was *emptiness*. A gaping, echoing cavern of nothingness, into which he fell and fell and fell.

Until Jane pulled him back.

Jim smiled as he stepped out into the morning and locked the cabin door behind him, his expression a little sad around the edges, grief still hiding in the quirk of his mouth and in the lines on his forehead. The air was sharp, stinging, but it was the kind of morning Sara would have loved – the kind of morning that held possibilities of snowmen built and snowball fights in the afternoon sunlight. Sometimes he could still hear her laughing when he looked at the fresh snow, at that glimmering blanket of white that cloaked the woods.

He took a deep breath to stave off the ache in his chest.

There only existed enough patience in him to brush the snow off his windshield – the rest, he decided, would fall off on the road. So, unceremoniously, he flung open his car door and slammed it shut, shoved his key into the ignition, and twisted it. The car turned over a few times, as reluctant to head out into the frigid morning as he was, and eventually, like him, accepted its fate.

He'd made it out onto the road by the time he noticed something under his the fleece blanket he kept in his car was *moving*.

*Shit*, he thought, debating whether to pull over or keep driving. In the end he opted to keep going, despising himself for leaving his gun at home. What the hell had he been thinking? Though he doubted those demo-things, whatever the hell Dustin called them, would have the decency to camouflage themselves beneath a blanket.

But he could think of someone who would.

He pulled back the blanket, and underneath the layer of fleece sat, huddled into a ball, exactly the person he expected to see.

“*Jesus!*” he exclaimed.

“Couldn’t sleep,” Jane said simply, as though this would be the only explanation he’d require. As if he wouldn’t want to know why the fuck his thirteen-year-old was sitting on the floor of his car underneath a fleece blanket instead of in her bed at home, asleep. Or, *trying* to sleep.

“Yeah,” Jim said, still trying to catch his breath as his passenger clambered up into the seat and buckled herself in. “That’s fine. Sometimes I can’t sleep, too. But why are you in my car?”

She was quiet, staring out the window. Sometimes he could accept whatever answer she gave, but this...this needed more than the half-assed explanation she’d given him. He might not know a ton about raising a teenager, but he damn well knew “couldn’t sleep” wasn’t a justification for this behavior. But he had a sinking feeling he already knew why she’d shown up here.

“Elle,” he tried again, softening his voice a little. After all, she hadn’t *meant* to scare him half to death. “What are you doing?”

“Wanted to see...where you go,” she muttered. “When it snows, you leave.”

Every alarm bell in Jim Hopper’s head went off at once.

There had been a reason this ritual was his and Jonathan’s secret. And even then, he knew the kid hated keeping it – he himself wasn’t too fond of keeping it between them. But if Joyce knew, Jim knew she would feel obligated to do something in return – to bake him cookies or buy him lunch or something like that, and the last thing he wanted was Joyce Byers feeling obligated to do *anything* for him. She already carried so much on those tiny shoulders of hers, and he didn’t want this to be another few pounds added on. Hell, he was doing this because...

Well, because he was an idiot. That was the simple explanation, and the only one that mattered at four in the goddamn morning when he’d only gotten three hours of sleep.

“Yeah, I do,” Jim said. “It’s nothing bad, I promise. It’s just...a secret.”

Jane relaxed a little, leaning back in her seat. "Why is it secret?"

"Because it has to be."

"Why?"

Jesus, she was asking him all the hard questions.

He trailed off, realizing his brain had taken the wheel and whether he liked it or not, he was still driving to the Byers' house. Whether he liked it or not, Jane was going to know all about the secret before the sun rose this morning. Just by getting in this car, she'd made all the decisions for him.

He sighed.

"Okay, kid," he tried again, looking over at her, finding her brown eyes in against the navy night sky and pinpricks of glimmering starlight. "If I tell you, you gotta promise not to tell anyone. That includes Mike, and Will, and all your little friends."

Jane's eyes widened a bit, as though taken aback by the responsibility she was being given. After a few moments of quiet consideration, she said,

"Promise."

Jim swallowed hard, trying to determine where to begin. Well, where they were going was probably a good start, he thought. At least he could figure out where to begin.

"When it snows, I go shovel the snow off Byers' driveway. For Will and Jonathan and Joyce," he said.

"Shovel?" Jane said, sounding incredulous. It occurred to him, briefly, that this was probably the farthest thing from what she'd imagined he'd been doing. And it even sounded a little silly, when he said it out loud: *I get up at four in the morning and go shovel a bunch of snow off of a driveway that isn't mine.*

"Why...shovel?" Jane asked, and Jim's stomach dropped. "Why do you go?"

“I, uh,” he started, his gruff exhale a swirl of white wisps. “I want to help them. Joyce and her kids....they’ve been through a lot. And Joyce *hates* mornings.”

He smiled, remembering how she’d often stumbled in halfway through first period during their high school days. Once the temperature dipped below freezing, he could count on seeing her only well after the bell rang. Granted, he wasn’t much better – he’d usually just made his way through the classroom door when she made it to the parking lot.

Jane seemed to read his mind. “*You* hate mornings.”

He wouldn’t bother denying it. “Okay. I do. I just...wanted to do something nice for them. They’re good people, and they deserve a break. That’s all there is to it.”

Jane stared at him for a few seconds, her eyes wide, like she was staring straight through him at the turmoil raging in his chest, reading all the thoughts he wasn’t ready to acknowledge – thoughts about Joyce, and their past, and their future. A future neither of them was ready to have, least of all him, but he’d be damned if it didn’t flicker through his head more and more often...when she smiled, when she brought Will over to spend time with Jane, when they shared cigarettes and old memories. When she looked at him, her brown gaze slowly growing less and less haunted by the events of last October, color coursing through her cheeks when she laughed.

It was as though the jagged edges of where they’d been broken, he and Joyce, fit together just right. And for a few hours, when he was with her, he felt like he was whole again. She’d always had a talent for that, even when they were younger – when he was with her, the world seemed a little less dark.

Jane’s stare unsettled him as he turned onto the Byers’ street, flicking off his headlights so he wouldn’t accidentally wake the unsuspecting family. She said nothing as the car slowed to a crawl, then a stop, crunching on the thick layer of snow that had fallen overnight. Uncomfortable, Jim decided to fill the silence.

“Stay in the car,” he said.

“Why?” Jane asked, her tone both angry and demanding.

“Because it’s not safe for you to be out here,” Jim tried. “Someone could see you.”

Jane frowned, crossing her arms over her chest, imitating a gesture she’d undoubtedly picked up from Mike.

“No one will see me. Too cold.”

Jim weighed the pros against the cons, as well as his exhausted brain could in the early morning deep freeze. It was highly unlikely anyone was awake in the sleepy town of Hawkins besides him and the kid on his right. And while he sure as hell wasn’t going to let her use her powers to help him, it might be nice to have the company. Shoveling snow was a lonely, tireless job.

“No using your powers. And stay in the shadows.”

Jane’s scowl deepened. Jim, done negotiating, opened the car door and stepped outside.

“That’s the deal,” he said. “Take it or leave it, kid.”

The frown didn’t vanish completely, but it slipped a fraction.

“Fine,” Jane said.

He took care to close the door quietly, and Jane, learning from his example, did the same. He turned to get the shovel out of his trunk, only to find it floating in mid-air, traveling toward him as though the wind had lifted it and brought it his way.

“I said—” he started, ready to launch into a lecture, interrupted mid-sentence.

“Quieter,” Jane said, depositing the shovel in his hands, and he guessed he couldn’t really argue with that. Her method *was* quieter than him unlocking and closing the gate. But dammit, he *told* her not to...

“If you do that again, you’re going back in the car,” Jim said, though

there was no heat behind his words – it was too cold for that.

“I understand,” she responded, and they made their way up the Byers driveway in silence. Jane adopted her post in the shadow of Joyce’s Pinto, leaning against the car, where only the faint outline of her curly hair was visible. *Good*, Jim thought. If he could barely see her, no one else around would be able to discover her.

Working quickly and quietly, he began shoving the snow off to the sides of the gravel line that led to the Byers’ front porch. His arm muscles burned, and he decided that this morning, of all mornings, Flo had damn well better let him have a donut. No more of this “apple a day” bullshit. Maybe he could grab one and sneak past her, wait until she was on the phone or something.

He was so lost in his donut daydream that the first time Jane spoke, her words were lost to the powdered sugar snowflakes and winter air.

“What?” he asked, hearing only a mumble and the whisper of the icy wind.

“She likes you,” Jane said, and lest there be any question about who she meant, the kid pointed at Joyce’s house.

Jim gave a startled cough, angry at his heart for skipping a beat, losing focus and wincing as a sheet of snow blew back in his direction and stung his face. Apparently he hesitated a moment too long, because Jane took his silence as an invitation to keep talking.

“She is happy,” Jane added, “with you.”

“We’re friends,” Jim said, wondering how the hell he ended up having this conversation – one he couldn’t even have with himself – at four-thirty in the morning with a 13-year-old. “Joyce is...” he trailed off, distracted by the mental image of her, smiling while they stood on the front porch of the cabin, his arm wrapped around her shoulders, a cigarette between her fingers. *Friends. Right.* “A very good friend.”

Jane shook her head. “Not just ‘friend.’ Like me and Mike.”

That was yet another conversation he didn’t want to have at four-

thirty in the morning while flinging snow over his shoulder, but he'd take these unsavory topics one at a time.

"Kid, it's not like that with Joyce and I," he said, swallowing hard, then convincing himself the gesture was a byproduct of the cold and not emotion. "She needs some time. We both do."

He'd made enough progress to see Jane's expression now, the furrow in her brow that accompanied either use of her powers or deep, continued thought.

"Will agrees with me."

*That* was enough to make him stop in his tracks.

"You talked about this with *Will*?" he asked, his tone sharper than he meant.

For some reason, the idea took him aback – that their kids could be discussing the nature of their relationship before he had the guts to sit down and think about it. To sort through the tangled cobweb of his feelings and get at whatever mess rested in the center.

But he was convinced on one thing, he wasn't wrong: Joyce needed time. She wasn't ready for anything, not for a while, not after Bob. And hell, he came with enough baggage to capsize any relationship; if she decided to date again, it would probably be best if it wasn't him. So why did that thought ignite that familiar bitterness, that acidic burn in his stomach?

"No," Jane answered, seeming to sense this was the answer he needed to hear. "Not much. A little. Once."

Because he was tired and the snow had seeped into his clothes and was dripping down his neck, and because his judgment was clouded by his deep, deep discomfort, Jim asked the question – the question he'd regret asking later, when his common sense returned.

"What did Will say?"

"He said...you make her laugh," Jane said. "She smiles with you."

Jim had no good answer for that, so he didn't try to give a coherent one. Instead, he just nodded. Instead, he just kept shoveling, finished the job, walked back up the driveway and cleared the porch, scraped ice off the cars. Instead he kept quiet, letting the howling wind and stinging snow speak for him, letting it say the words he couldn't.

When all was finished, he returned to Jane. She'd pulled her fleece blanket tightly around her shoulders, and she looked up at him with a regretful gaze. It was as though she knew, though he hadn't said it, that she'd overstepped a boundary.

"Sorry," she muttered, though he couldn't tell if she was sorry for bringing it up, or sorry he hadn't given her the answer she wanted, or sorry she couldn't tell how he felt so she could report back to Will.

*I'm sorry, too*, he felt like saying.

And he was. He was sorry their lives were such a fucked-up mess that he couldn't tell up from down when it came to his feelings for the woman in the house behind them. He was sorry she'd been through hell, and he'd been through hell, and somewhere in that labyrinth his emotional center had gotten lost and never found its way out. He was sorry for what happened to Bob, and for what happened to *them*, all those years ago.

All apologies he could never say, words the winter wind would steal from him before they could find their way to the open, starlit air. So instead of saying them, he reached down and ruffled Jane's hair to let her know there were no hard feelings.

"It's fine," he said, removing his hand from her head as he made his way toward the drivers' side. "But you watch too many soaps, kid."

\*\*\*

It was the last snowfall of 1985, and Joyce Byers awoke with a smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

Her expression, given the conditions outside, was an abnormality. It was just a day shy of being April. Everyone was just tired of the snow and had long ago stopped thinking it was pretty, started directing



swear words in its direction when they were unfortunate enough to step on the gray clumps of slush that collected in parking lots and around storm drains. It was about 30 degrees outside – just cold enough for the white stuff to stick – and when Hawkins awoke, it would be hidden under gray clouds and a cold front.

There was little reason for her to be smiling.

But now that she was listening for it, she could hear it: the faint sound of a scraping against the gravel on her driveway, a muttered swear word or two. There was no question as to what was going on, and the identity of her mysterious snowfall savior was no longer a mystery.

Jonathan had broken down a few days ago, apparently believing they wouldn't have another blizzard until November at the earliest. Granted, he'd lived in Hawkins for long enough to at least assume there was a decent chance of another storm, but Joyce figured he'd kept the secret for long enough. It was obvious it was eroding him inside, and whether he knew they were calling for another storm or not, she was happy he'd freed himself of the burden.

"Hey mom?" he'd said as they dried dishes after dinner. Will had gone to do his homework, and the house was oddly quiet. But it wasn't a harsh silence; it was comforting, embracing – it offered normalcy, instead of chaos.

Of course, the softness of the silence made her son's exaggerated casualness all the more harsh. Joyce could tell from the moment he opened his mouth that something was wrong, but she held her tongue – Jonathan would tell her when he was ready.

"HMMMMMM?" she said, drying a bowl and reaching to put it in the cabinet.

"I, um, have something to tell you," Jonathan said. Out of the corner of her eyes, Joyce saw he was shifting his weight from one foot to the other, avoiding eye contact. "Just...don't get upset."

Joyce drew in a deep breath, preparing herself for anything from "*Will's showing symptoms again but didn't want to tell you*" to "*Nancy*

*and I broke up.”*

“I won’t,” she promised, placing the bowl back on top of all the other chipped ceramics in the wood cupboard and closing the door. She leaned against the counter, giving Jonathan her full attention. “What’s wrong, honey?”

Jonathan gave a tight, tiny laugh – it sounded more like a bark than an expression of amusement. “Nothing’s wrong. But I’ve been keeping a secret, and I think you should know the truth.”

She swallowed hard, took a deep breath in an attempt to counteract her surging heartbeat. *You don’t know that it’s bad yet. Stop jumping to conclusions. Hear him out.*

“Okay,” she said slowly, wringing the towel in her hands, twisting it one way and then the other.

“You know that one morning in January, when I was in the kitchen studying for a biology test?” he said, finally meeting her gaze.

*Oh.* Yes, she remembered that morning, because it was one of the strangest in her recent memory – her son sitting at the kitchen table at an hour reserved only for chirping birds and coffee. She also remembered it because it was the first morning her snow savior had shown up, and continued to show up every time there was a blizzard. No matter how early she woke up, they finished earlier. The Wheelers were as mystified by the phenomenon as she was, and Jim just shrugged, muttered something about trespassing, and offered her another drag of his cigarette. All things considered, it had to be Jonathan - and given the direction their conversation was headed, she was ready for her suspicions to be confirmed.

She nodded, and Jonathan continued.

“I didn’t have a test,” he confessed, and Joyce couldn’t help a smirk.

“I figured,” Joyce said, her smile maturing to a full-blown grin. “Let me guess. *You’ve been shoveling the driveway this whole time?*”

“What? No,” Jonathan said, and just like that, her smile vanished.

"I woke up that morning and heard a scraping sound in the driveway. I was worried it was the-" he stopped, swallowed hard. There was no need to give it a name – both he and Joyce knew exactly what he was talking about. "So I looked out my window. And I saw Hopper."

"*Hopper?*" Joyce said, the dish towel wrung into a compact knot of worry and confusion.

Jonathan nodded. "He wanted me to keep it a secret, but I thought you should know. This whole time, he's been shoveling for us."

Joyce stumbled over her words, several sentences trying to escape all at once.

"But why...what...I don't understand."

"I don't, either," Jonathan said, shrugging. "He told me he was trying to help. That he didn't want you to feel obligated to do anything in return, and if you found out it was him, you would."

*Dammit, Jim.*

He was right – she was sure as hell going to do something nice for him in return. Granted, money was tight – it always was – but she could probably swing the cash to buy him a pack or two of cigarettes, or that beer he liked, or a new Scrabble set for him and Jane (apparently theirs was missing the 'Z' and 'Q' tiles, because Jim had hidden them when they first started playing and had now forgotten where he put them).

Her expression must have morphed into something resembling determination mixed with a fair amount of anger, because Jonathan jumped back into the conversation.

"Don't be pissed at him, mom," he said. "I know you wish he had told you, but-"

"No, it makes sense," she said. That much was true. She'd expect Jim to do something kind and expect no credit for it: even when they were younger, he'd done random, thoughtful things just to see her smile. He'd shown up at school with a pack of her favorite gum, kept her company when her parents skipped town for days on end, let her

wear his jacket when she was cold. He didn't expect anything back then, and 20 years later, he still expected absolutely nothing from her. "But he can't expect me to just accept that he's been doing this the whole winter. Do you *know* how much snow we've had? How many times he's come over here and—"

"I know," Jonathan said.

She felt her throat closing up and decided to stop talking before her voice broke. It was all suddenly too much; Jim Hopper, who hated mornings just as vehemently as she did, showing up at her house with a shovel and ice scraper and digging them out from under one of the worst winters Hawkins had ever had. He was too good, she thought. He'd always been too damn *good*. Even when he'd buried himself under drinking and half-assed hookups, he was a good man.

"Thank you for telling me," was all she said, drawing him in for a tight, long hug.

And that was how Joyce Byers ended up conscious at four in the morning on the day of the last snowfall of 1985 with a smile and a racing heartbeat. Much like she had on the night of the first snowfall, she slid out of bed and shucked off her pajamas, taking a little more care with her appearance than she had back in January. As much as her feelings for Jim Hopper confused her from time to time, she at least knew she didn't want to stumble outside in her raggedy sweatpants and old Hawkins High sweatshirt – not this time. But there was something to be said for prioritizing warmth over outward appearances, especially at this hour of the morning, so she opted for a thick sweater and jeans.

Doing her best not to awaken the rest of her household with her stumbling, she pushed open her bedroom door and headed for the bathroom, where she ran a comb through her hair and smeared on a layer of foundation and mascara. Her movements were coated with exhaustion and ache, and briefly, she wondered why the hell she was doing this. It was dark outside, and Jim was a *friend*. He'd probably come over in his pajamas, for God's sake, and it was incredibly unlikely he gave a damn what she looked like. He'd be scared shitless at the sight of her, and here she was trying to look nice.

Her stomach flipped, and she decided she'd ridden that train of thought far enough. Her feelings for him were growing harder and harder to decipher as the events of last October faded into the background of their daily lives. Sometimes she caught herself thinking about him on her downtime at work, wondering how his day was going, wondering if calling to ask him if Jane wanted to see Will was a suitable enough front for what she really wanted: to see him. Slowly, it had become easier and easier to lean on him, in the aftermath of everything. He was sturdy, and strong, and as kind as he had ever been, and so tightly woven into her past and present that ripping him out would tear her apart inside.

Sometimes she wondered what it would be like to kiss him.

To have him push her against the shelves of the storage closet, to giggle against his mouth, to grab a fistful of that tan police uniform and pull him down to her. But those thoughts were always accompanied by a swift, searing current of guilt, one that washed away her daydreams and left doubt in their wake. She wasn't looking for a relationship – not after Bob – and if anything, Bob had confirmed her worst suspicions: that people close to her, to her family, tended to get hurt. If she could, she wanted to spare Jim that pain. He'd once referred to himself as a black hole, but Joyce thought of herself as a tornado; fated by nature to bring destruction, chaos, desolation. In protecting her family she lost whatever normalcy remained in her life, swirling in a vortex of alternate dimensions and shadowy truths.

Joyce took a deep breath.

None of this mattered right now, she reminded herself. What mattered right now was the man standing in her driveway, shoveling heavy, thick snow away from her car and chipping ice off her windshield. What mattered right now was getting her boots on and going out there and thanking him for what he'd done for the past three months. The rest of the bullshit in her brain could wait.

A few minutes later she'd pulled on her boots and coat, and stepped out onto her porch in the wintry April night. She could barely make out his silhouette halfway down her driveway, snowflakes still falling in loopy, zigzag patters through the icy air.

“Hey!” she called, and she saw Jim’s back stiffen.

“Joyce?” His voice carried an exaggerated kind of casualness that faded into shock, disbelief. “I, uh, didn’t think you’d be up.”

“I’m not, usually,” she said, walking toward him. “Neither are you.”

She was soon close enough to see the tiny smile that stretched his lips, the shyness in his gaze. He’d been made, and he knew it.

“I didn’t want to tell you,” he said. “Don’t blame the kid – I told him to keep it between us. If you’re going to get mad, get mad at me.”

He’d stopped shoveling now, stood next to her car with a gaze equally apprehensive and defiant. It was clear he expected some kind of lecture – and if she’d been more awake, maybe she would have given him one. Nothing serious, nothing too accosting, but enough for him to realize he wasn’t going to get his wish – she’d be getting him something for his trouble.

“I’m not mad,” she said, keeping her tone even and measured. It occurred to her that this was the exact voice she’d often used on Jonathan and Will, when they’d done something she didn’t approve of or went somewhere without telling her. And because Jim was Jim, he picked up on it.

“Just disappointed?” he said, and they both chuckled, any awkwardness between them dissipating.

She leaned against her car, letting the cold metal hold her up, and next to her, Jim did the same. It was impossible not to think about the last time they’d stood together like this, the exact same position, outside the Snow Ball. How he’d wrapped his arm around her and pressed his lips to her hair, reassured her, comforted her. How could everything be so different, yet so similar?

“You didn’t have to do this,” she said.

“I know,” he responded.

“I’m buying you a pack of Camels,” she said, her voice firm. “Probably two.”

“Joyce,” he started, sounding weary. This was, she knew, the exact discussion he didn’t want to have. But goddamn it, he wasn’t going to get out of this with nothing. He’d been helping her family all winter, and she wasn’t a charity case.

“No!” she said, as sternly as she could muster. “If you keep arguing with me, it’ll be three.”

“Fine,” he huffed, not sounding like it was fine at all. “But I never meant for you to-“

“Okay, three.”

“I wasn’t *trying* to -“

“Do you want to make it four?”

“Dammit, Joyce,” he chuckled.

Where she’d get the money for three packs all at once, she had no idea. But she liked the way the threat sounded as it slipped past her lips, and when she looked at Jim, she found his gaze more appraising than frustrated. She swallowed hard, recognizing that look. It was the same way he’d looked at her at the kitchen table all those months ago, the first time they’d shared a cigarette in two decades. Though the weather was frigid, she felt her cheeks flush.

“Why did you do it?” she asked.

He stopped, hesitated, looked away. Snow was still falling, if barely, flakes floating down and peppering his beard with white crystals that melted as soon as her eyes settled on them. She felt snow sticking to her mittens and melting, knew she should be cold, but felt only warmth. Even the wind did no damage to her now.

“I wanted to help. And I know, I know,” he said, raising his hands in mock surrender. “You don’t need it. You’re fine on your own. But just because you can handle everything yourself...” He stopped, looked at her again, his voice softening. “Doesn’t mean you have to.”

His words froze her more deeply than the temperature ever could, and she felt her lungs burning. Joyce Byers had not needed anyone in

a very long time. Not Lonnie, not her parents, not even the doctors at Hawkins Lab. But Jim was different. Jim was the closest she had come to it, to needing someone, and that thought was both electrifying and terrifying.

And maybe, she thought, that was why she couldn't let herself get close to him, like she'd been with Bob. Because if the loss of Bob – who she'd liked, but hadn't needed – was enough to wound her this deeply, how would she ever recover from losing Jim?

How could she ever forgive herself if the tornado tore him from her, too?

“Thank you,” she said, because that was all she could say. Because anything else, right now, was too much. Because she already felt tears forming, and she didn't want to let him see, even though she knew he wouldn't fault her for it. He'd already seen her with every wall down, stripped to the barest of emotions at her core. There was no point in hiding anything from him, least of all her tears.

She needed him, and she couldn't lose him. But he was here, now. She was here, now. All the nightmares of their past were but hazy memories, evaporated upon awakening.

And then, because she was happy, and nervous, and desperate for him not to see her tears, and her heart was beating so loudly she thought he had to be able to hear it, she pushed herself onto her tiptoes and closed the gap between them in a soft, slow kiss.

He made a gruff sound of surprise as her lips brushed his, and she allowed herself only a handful of seconds to treasure that moment. To feel his heart racing under her palm, warmth spreading from his hand as it rested on the small of her back. To hear the wind as it whistled through the leafless trees, seeming to pass around them, allowing them this small, fleeting moment of bliss.

And it was exactly that: fleeting. She pulled away, took a second to compose herself before opening her eyes, preparing herself for whatever she might see: confusion, disgust, bewilderment. After all, it wasn't as though he'd passionately kissed her back – this was, all things considered, vastly different from her graveyard shift Melvald's



fantasies.

She opened her eyes, and his gaze was unreadable, hidden behind a wall of emotions she couldn't translate.

"Jim," she started, trying to cobble together a meaningful sentence as her heart sank lower and lower. "I...I didn't mean to--"

He cut her off with a second, far less gentle kiss.

It was her turn to give a startled cry, melting into him, leaning into his touch. He was warm, and solid, and *Jim*, and this – this was everything she'd imagined on those nights when her brain was anywhere but at work. She kissed him back with every ounce of uncertainty within her, nullifying her doubts, her fears, her worries.

Nothing seemed to really matter at four-thirty in the morning. The world was trapped in a sort of twilight, ghostlike glow, as though everything the moonlight touched was nothing more than a mirage.

Nothing seemed to really matter at four-thirty in the morning, except for this, which she was half-convinced she was dreaming.

Nothing seemed to really matter at four-thirty in the morning, except for Jim's arms around her waist and her fingers in his hair, the way he tasted of spice and smoke.

She could have kissed him until the sun came up, but her lungs had other ideas, and breathless and smiling, she leaned away. Jim held her for a little longer, the sincerity and softness in his gaze as disarming as it was charming. It had been a while, Joyce thought, since anyone looked at her like that.

The cold began to make its presence known again, as a particularly harsh gust of wind blew her hair in front of her eyes. She brushed it back into place, hating herself for not wearing a hat, again reminded that they weren't standing in the storage closet at Melvald's.

"I'll help you finish," she said, looking down at the shovel they'd both long forgotten.

"Yeah?" Jim quirked an eyebrow and gave her a shit-eating grin, his

very expression an innuendo.

She snorted, rolling her eyes and giving him a playful punch on the arm, right on the Hawkins Police patch on his jacket; she doubted he could even feel it.

“You’re awful,” she groaned.

He laughed and leaned down again, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead.

“I can take care of it,” he said softly. “Go get some sleep.”

Intending to do the complete opposite of that, Joyce freed herself – though not without great reluctance – from his grasp and picked up the shovel.

“Just because you can do it yourself, doesn’t mean you have to,” she said. He smiled.

And together, they watched the sun rise over Hawkins.